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“Building a Strategic Partnership: U.S.-India Relations in the Wake of Mumbai”
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman
House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

On November 26 of last year, ten terrorists crept ashore in Mumbai and proceeded to terrorize the innocent citizens of that city. The blood-soaked rampage lasted 62 hours and in the end 165 people were killed, hundreds more were injured and the survivors were left dazed and shaken. I want to express my own continuing outrage at this heartless, barbaric, senseless terrorist attack; to offer, again, my sincerest condolences to the families and friends of the victims; and to provide my own assurances to the government of India that your friends stand with you in the face of our common enemy: violent Islamic extremism.

This attack was not the first terrorist incident in India, nor even in Mumbai. Long before September 11, India already had an unfortunately long history of combating terrorists and has seen far too many of its citizens and even its leaders killed by terrorism. But I don't think we should simply add the latest outrage to the long list of similar outrages. The attack in Mumbai had some significant characteristics to it that require us all to sit up and take notice. It appears that the targets of the attacks were chosen specifically to link the attackers with the larger global jihad movement. The targeting of luxury hotels, Harriman House, the Jewish cultural center in Mumbai, and a café popular with foreigners all suggest that the attack in Mumbai was not simply just about Kashmir but was, in fact, an announcement by the Pakistani-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Toiba that they had adopted the larger goals espoused by al Qaeda.

The first step in our response to the attack should be to increase counter-terrorism cooperation between the United States and India both in frequency of consultation and depth of content. I recognize that Admiral Mullen was just in New Delhi last December and reiterated the U.S. military's commitment to work with his Indian counterparts to combat terrorism. That's a welcome signal, but it's time to stop simply issuing statements and to start actually cooperating. While the United States and India have had a joint counter-terrorism working group since 2000, the group has only met 9 times. Annual meetings are nice but more frequent and substantive meetings would be better. In this regard, I'd suggest that the United States and India establish a senior-level strategic dialogue that occurs several times a year. I have in mind something similar to the dialogue between Strobe Talbot and Jaswant Singh.

I don't mean that there should be a special envoy for India or that such talks should be issue specific, but I believe that regularized conversations between the most senior levels of both governments on the broad range of global issues where we have common interests will lay the foundation for the "strategic partnership" that everyone professes to want, but has thus far proved elusive.

Over the last decade, and particularly since the 2005 Joint Statement, the United States and India have established channels both governmental and in conjunction with the private sector to discuss energy, trade, agriculture, health care, and high-technology issues. These dialogues have proven useful but insufficient.

For example, our discussions in both the Trade Policy Group and Agricultural Knowledge Initiative were unable to prevent India and the United States from being on opposite sides during the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization negotiations. With regular senior level dialogue both nations would have had a better understanding of the other's concern: ours about open markets for agricultural goods; India's about how to protect the livelihood of small farmers in a competitive global economy. It seems to me that the U.S.-India Trade Policy Forum was either the wrong address or insufficiently senior enough to address the political and social issues that accompany any serious discussions about the expansion of free trade.

Both nations are also talking past each other on the climate change debate. While the United States sees the virtue of pursuing a cap on carbon emissions, India sees such efforts as an attempt to limit the pace of its economic growth and accuses the U.S. of ignoring its responsibility for cumulative emissions. Yet both nations see the importance of addressing the question with Prime Minister Singh last year unveiling India's first ever national action plan to address climate change. This issue is also an issue of sufficient size and complexity to warrant frequent discussion at the most senior levels of both governments.

Regional security issues would also benefit from such discussions. In particular, divergent views on how to deal with the challenge posed by Iran have, in the past, been the cause of some friction. With the Obama Administration in the midst of a policy review and having just appointed a new Special Adviser for Southwest Asia, it is my hope that, whatever new strategy is developed, India will have been consulted early in the process. Any strategy addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions needs to be supported by a broad international coalition and India, based on both its interests and its values, should be a part of that coalition.

Right about now is where I'm supposed to talk about the shared values of the world's oldest and the world's largest democracies providing the basis for a our strategic partnership going forward. While the truth about shared values is undeniable, I'd like to retire the cliché for a moment and instead urge that both nations roll up their respective sleeves and get to work on the substance of which true strategic partnerships are made: not bland agreements in principle, but binding commitments based on serious understandings about respective national priorities. The truth is that we're not there yet. And there's not a moment to lose.

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